

VIA Rail once again refuses a partial return of services to the Gaspé Peninsula

Gilles Gagné

CAPLAN – The Member of Parliament for the riding of Avignon-La Mitis-Matane-Matapédia, Kristina Michaud, met on May 17 with representatives of VIA Rail in an attempt to verify what the public transporter is considering regarding the Gaspesian service east of Matapédia and she came back from the meeting with no clear answer..

Ms. Michaud was accompanied by her communication officer, Jérôme Lévesque-Boucher. Elizabeth Prass and Philip Cannon were representing the public transporter.

"As I know that bringing the train back home is a priority for Gaspésians, I have taken steps with VIA Rail to find out the organization's intentions regarding the service restoration in our region. The discussions during a meeting with the Director of Public Affairs and the senior advisor for government relations of VIA Rail were not very encouraging," points out the Member of Parliament.

When Kristina Michaud inquired about what VIA Rail could do to add the New Richmond or Caplan to Matapédia stretch to the Halifax-Montreal train, "the VIA Rail representatives' reply was that



The repairs of the railway between Caplan and Gaspé seems to be accelerating since the spring but VIA Rail is not considering a partial return of train service as of now. In the photo, we see the gap left by the fast demolition of the old Ruisseau-Leblanc bridge between July 11 and 15 at the municipal limit of Caplan and Saint-Siméon.

it would add six hours to the Ocean train time, and that it was out of the question," says Mr. Lévesque-Boucher.

In fact, Elizabeth Prass and Philip Cannon never presented the most viable option, a train specific to the Matapédia to New Richmond or Caplan section of the line, a solution that would only require the two trains to connect in Matapédia, the most practical way to reduce any delay.

"Although VIA Rail shows its desire to serve the Gaspé again, it assures that it cannot do anything before the rail line is in good condition. Since the railway belongs to

the Government of Quebec, it is their responsibility to restore it. Tenders for its repairs and rebuilding are underway, but it could take a few more years before a service can be offered again," adds Kristina Michaud.

"At this point, it is up to the Government of Quebec to speed up the process, but as a Member of Parliament from the region, I will make sure to follow the file closely, as I did when I took office. Passenger rail transport is an essential service and the Gaspé Peninsula residents must be able to take advantage of it. Upgrading the railway would also facilitate the transport of goods,

which would certainly contribute to an economic opening up of the entire region. I will continue to put pressure where necessary as long as the train is not back in the Gaspé Peninsula," concludes the Member of Parliament.

Freight traffic is regular between Matapédia and New Richmond. It has been the case, with no interruptions, between Matapédia and Nouvelle. Trains have been circulating regularly between Nouvelle and New Richmond since 2016, after years of not being used due to the 2005 closure of the Smurfit-Stone linerboard mill. The railway is currently open to Caplan, just

east of New Richmond but there has been very little traffic generated out of Caplan over the last decade.

The last VIA Rail passenger train served the Matapédia to New Carlisle stretch in the summer of 2013. Between New Carlisle and Gaspé, the last VIA train rolled in December 2011.

Freight trains are operated by a municipal corporation, the Gaspésie Railway Society. That entity is currently inquiring about the possibility of acquiring the Orford Express, a passenger train that was operated as a tourist train in the Eastern Townships until 2020. Offering a passenger train service pending financial funding represents an option being assessed by the Gaspé Railway Society's management.

The Gaspé Peninsula line belongs to Transports Québec, the province's department of Transport. Since 2017, the ministry has delayed on numerous occasions the deadlines pertaining to traffic resumption east of Caplan. As of now, freight service is supposed to resume to Port Daniel by 2024. A date is no longer set for a return to Gaspé despite Premier François Legault's August 2019 commitment that it would occur in 2025.

Photo: G. Gagné